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Soviets got 1M secret messages

Defector: Spy ring KGB's 'most important operation'

By Sam Meddis
USA TODAY

At least 1 million of the United States' coded military messages were betrayed by the Walker spy ring, Soviet double-defector Vitaly Yurchenko told CIA interrogators.

The revelation came in government documents filed Thursday by prosecutors pushing for a tough sentence for Walker spy ring member Jerry Whitworth.

The ring — four current or former sailors headed by John A. Walker Jr. — was "the most important operation in the KGB's history," Yurchenko said during his debriefing.

Among reactions Thursday:

■ "Wow," said former CIA Director Stansfield Turner. "The fact they got into our codes to the tune of a million messages is really serious."

■ Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said Yurchenko's claim was "extremely accurate (and) if anything, understates the enormous damage."

The ring's handlers from the KGB's elite "Department Sixteen" — which handles only the most sensitive and clandestine spying operations — got such prestigious decorations as the Hero of the Soviet Union and the Order of the Red Banner, Yurchenko said.

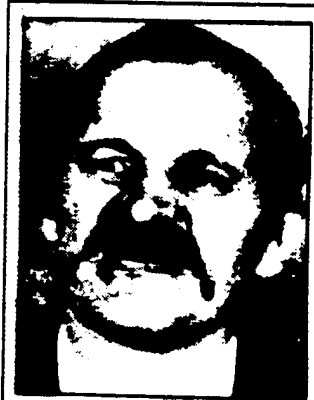
Yurchenko returned to the Soviet Union in November 1985, after three months as a defector, claiming that he had been drugged by the CIA.

Georgetown University Soviet expert Edward Luttwak said he fears Yurchenko may have been a Soviet "plant" who made exaggerated claims about the spy ring.

Possible reasons:

■ To mislead the U.S. into thinking that the Soviets never acquired more sensitive information elsewhere.

■ Or to cover up an even larger Soviet spy ring that still may be operating.



AP
YURCHENKO: Spy ring was highly valued.

Officials hint at the damage done to USA

Here are excerpts from documents prosecutors presented to show how much the spy ring involving Jerry Whitworth hurt the USA.

From John L. Martin, chief of the Justice Department criminal division's internal security section:

■ "From his briefings, (Soviet defector Vitaly) Yurchenko learned that the KGB regarded the Walker-Whitworth operation as the most important operation in the KGB's history."

■ "Yurchenko stated that the information (from the spy ring) enabled the KGB to decipher over 1 million messages."

■ "Yurchenko was informed... that the information learned from the Walker-Whitworth operation would have been 'devastating' to the United States in the event of war."

From Rear Adm. William O. Studeman, director of Naval Intelligence:

■ "The activities of Jerry Whitworth... permitted the Soviets to gauge the true capabilities and vulnerabilities of the U.S. Navy."